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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses criteria for evaluating foreign language textbooks. First, common textbook dislikes, concerning both content and format, are outlined. Then three desirable characteristics--authenticity, communication, and integration--are discussed at length, divided into subcriteria, and arranged as a rating scale for textbook evaluation. Criteria for text authenticity include the presence of authentic spoken and written language samples, a wide range of cultural topics, typical cultural situations, global awareness potential, and illustrations of target language and culture. Criteria for judging the communication aspect of the book include a balance of practice in all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), emphasis on the use of language in realistic situations, limited grammar and vocabulary, language practice exercises that are situational and items that are contextual, a range of meaningful activities, and open-ended questions. Criteria marking integration include clear indications of the relationship between language and culture, built-in communicative activities, systematic treatment of culture and communication as well as language, and the assigning of equal weight to language, culture, and communication. A rating scale for evaluating the materials' global potential for developing student skills and attitudes is also included. (MSE)

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CHOOSING AND USING TEXTBOOKS

Whenever foreign language teachers meet each other for the first time, the first words after "How do you do?" are usually "What textbook do you use?"

Since the selection of textbooks is so important to us, it might be expected that there would be many articles in our professional literature devoted to the topic of criteria for selection, but such is not the case. An examination of the two leading American journals of the past five years revealed only a few articles dealing with overall textbook content, and there were no articles which proposed criteria for selection.

On the other hand, there were several articles that contained ideas which could be used to develop criteria, but only if a framework were available in which to fit the ideas. What I will do in this presentation is to suggest one possible framework based on my experience as a teacher and coordinator of foreign languages in the Collingswood, New Jersey Public Schools and also as a member of the writing team for a recent set of secondary school French materials: I was the author of the teacher's annotations for books one and two and also the co-author of the workbooks accompanying both these texts. This experience

served to sharpen my thinking about criteria for textbook selection.

When it comes time to select a new textbook at your school, I suppose that you and your colleagues do as we do at my school: we talk a lot about what we want and don't want, and examine as many different books as possible. We also prepare a written set of criteria in advance, and match our findings of each book in writing against these criteria. We revise our criteria as we learn about new developments in foreign language education. I'm sure that all of you also share your opinions with your colleagues, but if you don't put your criteria in written form, I would urge that you do so. In that way, you'll be sure to evaluate all texts using the same measuring instrument.

Let's review briefly the things we don't like about the textbooks we've used, and then we'll turn to the things we'd like to see. We'll bear in mind that there is probably not one perfect textbook for everyone, but that there are books that are superior to others, given our individual requirements. After years of experience with various textbooks and accompanying materials, I know what I don't like, and I would imagine that your list is very similar to mine. Figure 1 summarizes these dislikes. As you consider this list, you'll probably think of specific examples from your own experience.

Figure 1

TEXTBOOK DISLIKES

1. Too much material.
2. No identification of more important items.
3. Grammar explanations unrelated to core content.
4. Grammar drills with unrelated, uncontextualized items.
5. Unreal dialogues.
6. Unrelated drawings and photos.
7. Lack of communication practice.
8. Insufficient practice for important structures.
9. Lack of clarification between spoken and written language.
10. Workbook exercises that are repetitious, irrelevant, uncreative.

Perhaps what I have disliked most is being unable to get through a two-book series in two years; having to take three or even four years. One journal article referred to this problem as "too much between the covers to cover."

I object to the presentation of large amounts of vocabulary and grammar in any one chapter, and to the lack of identification of those items which are more important than others.

Another peeve is the use of examples for the grammar explanations which are completely unrelated to the core content; the "la plume de ma tante" examples. Also passé are those textbooks with an emphasis on drills composed of items which don't hang together in one context.

I do not like a-cultural dialogues, obviously invented to present grammar points, where the characters are Polly-annas, where everything is bland and unreal, and where the setting is a neutral never-never land. I also object to photographs and illustrations, no matter how pretty, which have nothing to do woth the printed content.

A textbook without many specific suggestions for student-to-student communication practice should be seriously reconsidered. It's not that we teachers are unable to create such activities, it's that we simply do not have time.

I'm annoyed when I have to develop exercises for the practice of important structures that are insufficiently treated in the text, or to clarify which items belong to the spoken language and which to the written. Teachers should not have to rewrite their textbooks in order to use them in the classroom.

As for workbooks, I have never liked those which repeat exactly the same material of the textbook or those which consist of fill-in-the-blank items which are not personalized or situationalized and which do not tap the creativity of students.

As I reviewed these dislikes and thought about what I would like to see in textbooks, three key words kept coming to mind: <u>authenticity</u>, <u>communication</u>, and <u>integration</u>. These were the same key concepts which I had used as working guidelines to write workbook materials. I found that they

could also be used to develop criteria to select textbook materials.

The concepts of authenticity, communication, and integration are interrelated, but each one will be discussed separately for the purpose of analysis. My remarks will be directed primarily to beginning and intermediate level textbooks. Figure 2 contains a framework for rating textbooks with criteria based in these three concepts.

Let's first consider the concept of authenticity. The claim is often made that the study of another people provides the most direct access to their culture. But in order for this claim to be valid, the culture and language presented must be authentic, and textbooks must be carefully examined in this light.

It's very important the the language presented in the textbook ring true--that the samples of spoken language be those actually used by natives in face-to-face communication and that the samples of written language be those which could appear in, or are adapted from, real written material such as letters, reports, newspapers, and magazines.

The cultural content must also be authentic and must reflect contemporary ways of life. There are textbooks on the market which contain lovely photographs in full color of pastoral scenes and folkloric festivals, but which ignore industrial and business aspects.

The situations in dialogues and readings must reflect those situations important in the various geographical areas

Figure 2

RATING SCALE FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS

	High	Mid	Low
Authenticity			
Authentic spoken language samples			
Authentic written language samples			
Wide range of cultural topics			
Typical cultural situations			
Global awareness potential			
Target language and culture in the world			
Communication			
Balance of practice in all four skills			
Emphasis on use of language in realistic situations			
Limited grammar and vocabulary			
Language practice exercises situationalized and items contextualized			
Range of meaningful activities			
Open-ended questions			
Integration			
Relationship between language and culture clear			
Communicative activities built in			
Systematic treatment of culture and communication as well as language			
Equal weight to language, culture, and communication			

areas where the language is spoken. For too long, textbooks ignored the many places in the world where the target languages were spoken. Several years ago, I used a French textbook with unrealistic dialogues set in a locale which could have been anywhere, except that Paris was specified and Textbook French was spoken.

The varied aspects of daily life in different social settings should be treated. The themes should range from those of the immediate environment, such as greetings and personal identification; through the activities of daily life, such as shopping and meals; significant events, such as career choices and vacations; and societal issues, such as education and ecology.

There exists no definitive set of cultural topics that should be included in foreign language textbooks. Colleagues in Indiana are in the process of developing a set of topics which could be treated in all foreign language courses, as shown in figure 3. You might evaluate your own textbooks by determining to what degree they treat these topics. You may not require that every item be covered in your courses, but this comprehensive list can be very helpful.

The claim is also made that the study of a foreign language is necessary to the acquisition of a global perspective, but classroom materials must be specifically focused on global awareness for this claim to be valid. The 1981 Northeast Conference Reports contained a rating

Figure 3

GENERIC CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Travel/Transportation

- Long distance travel
- Travel within a country
- Getting around in a city
- Obtaining lodging
- Famous places to visit
- Foods and meals outside the home
- Shopping/Money
- Telling time
- A trip around the target-language speaking world

School

- The classroom
- The educational system
  - Levels
  - Courses of study
  - Grading/Promotion
- Extra-curricular activities

The Family and the Home

- Family relationships
- Living quarters
- Food and meals
- Celebrations/Outing
- Beliefs and values
- Family responsibilities

World of Work

- Professions and jobs
- Work ethnic(s)
- Places of work
- Products and services
- Careers involving foreign-language skills

Leisure time

- Vacations
- Sports
- Concerts
- Drama
- TV/Radio
- Parties
- Spare time at home

Politics and History

- Form(s) of government
- Highlights of history
- Famous historical figures

The Target Language in the World

- Geography
- Ethnic influence in the U.S.
- Political influence
- Economic/Scientific influence
- Linguistic influence
- Cultural influence

Fine Arts

- Literature
  - Authors/Poets/Genres
- Visual arts/artists
- Dance
- Music
  - Composers
  - Performers
- Folklore
- Film

Youth

- Roles of children
  - In the family
  - In society
- Children's toys/games
- Boy-girl relationships
- Expectations

Meeting Personal Needs

- Telephone
- Shopping
- Obtaining services
- "Small talk"
- Expressing emotions/feelings
- Understanding nonverbal language
- Clothing

SOURCE: Indiana Department of Education and Indiana University Office of School Programs, working document, 1983.

scale for evaluating foreign language textbooks for global awareness content. This scale is reproduced in figure 4. I would suggest that you measure your textbooks against this instrument, too. The results might surprise you.

One of the dimensions of a global perspective is cross-cultural awareness. It is also claimed that the study of a foreign language fosters cross-cultural awareness. For this claim to be taken seriously, materials must specifically treat similarities and differences between the native and target cultures. In the past few years, there have been many improvements in textbooks regarding the authenticity of language and culture, but the cross-cultural awareness dimension is still not adequately treated.

Textbook exercises must also be authentic regarding participation of the student. It is assumed that one of the purposes of foreign language instruction is to prepare students to be travelers abroad. This is a distinct real-life possibility, and activities are needed which would cast students in authentic roles, activities in which they would be called on to show understanding of the target culture and contrast their own culture.

The second concept in the framework above is <u>communication</u>. In the past ten years or so, there have been many helpful journal articles and professional meetings dealing with classroom techniques which stress communication.

We have learned that mechanical pattern drills do not automatically lead to oral proficiency. We know that the

Figure 4

GLOBAL POTENTIAL RATING SCALE

Material: _____

Will this material help the student . . .

		High potential				Low potential
1.	Learn accurate information about another culture?	5	4	3	2	1
2.	Decrease egocentric perceptions?	5	4	3	2	1
3.	Decrease ethnocentric perceptions?	5	4	3	2	1
4.	Decrease stereotypic perceptions?	5	4	3	2	1
5.	Increase the student's ability to empathize?	5	4	3	2	1
6.	Develop constructive attitudes toward diversity?	5	4	3	2	1
7.	Develop constructive attitudes toward change?	5	4	3	2	1
8.	Develop constructive attitudes toward ambiguity?	5	4	3	2	1
9.	Develop constructive attitudes toward conflict?	5	4	3	2	1

SOURCE: Loew, H.Z., Bragaw, D.H. and Wooster, J.S., "Global Responsibility: The Role of the Foreign Language Teacher" in Foreign Languages and International Studies: Toward Cooperation and Integration. T.H. Geno (ed.), 1981 Northeast Conference Reports (Middlebury, VT: The Conference, 1981), page 65.

classroom climate will be warmer and student attitude more positive when oral practice is personalized and meaningful. We have also become aware that if we claim to teach communication, we must allow students to talk more: researchers have found that foreign language teachers are not much different from others when it comes to giving students the opportunity to talk only one-third of the time. We also know that an emphasis on grammar rules is not effective in developing speaking ability. It is also important to recognize that communication involves all four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Given this knowledge, textbooks should contain many exercises allowing for personalized, meaningful practice and for a balance of practice in all four skills. If communication is a goal claimed by textbook publishers, then they must provide appropriate practice in the form of realistic activities.

But saying merely that communication is important is not enough: we need to know what constitutes communication at various levels of proficiency. Until recently, such descriptions were not available, but ACTFL has now published a set of generic proficiency guidelines for the four skills and for culture. Parallel language-specific guidelines have been developed for French, German, and Spanish, and work is underway for Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. These guidelines can be used to estimate to what degree textbooks meet communicative goals.

However, statements of goals do not contain specifics for the selection of content. Having said that students need to be able to ask questions, for example, we need to know what topics they should ask questions about, in what situations, which structures they should use, and what words are needed. There are no definitive answers at present to these matters, nor is there one definitive inventory of language functions, but there are some helpful references available, a few of which are mentioned in the selected reading list at the end of this paper. They contain lists of functions, as well as many suggestions for communication practice.

Textbooks should strive to present situations which are typical of the everyday use of language and should clarify the functions expressed. They should limit the number of grammatical and lexical items, presenting only those which are relevant and appropriate. Items should be included based on such things as usefulness to students, frequency of occurrence in the culture, generalizability to other situations, and relative degree of simplicity.

When examining textbooks, look for exercises to practice grammar and vocabulary in which the direction line sets forth a realistic situation and in which all items are contextualized within that situation. Look for open-ended questions about content as well as those requiring specific information.

Look for a large number of speaking exericses which direct students to talk with each other about classroom transactions, their personal opinions, and their lives outside the classroom; activities in which students pretend that they are in other situations; and role-playing in which both situations and roles are imaginary. Look for writing exercises which are meaningful and which tap student creativity, such as letters to pen pals, reports of interviews, and personalized paragraph writing.

Communication activities should be interspersed throughout a chapter, not added on at the end as optional. Workbook exercises should be truly complementary, reinforcing the language and culture learnings of the textbook, but varying the situations and activities. Recordings should contain listening comprehension material not found in print that is likewise complementary, not merely supplementary.

The third and last concept in the framework above is integration. The 1983 Annual Edition of the NEA publication Today's Education, in a section about foreign languages, pointed out a difference between good and bad textbooks. The authors stated that good textbooks integrate their presentation of the language with descriptions of the culture that goes with it, and that separating them is like studying the Renaissance without mentioning art, or vice versa. They said that the worst texts are those that separate culture from language and those that leave communicative activities up to the teacher, instead of building them into the text.

In 1980, a group of foreign language education experts were convened by ACTFL in Boston to discuss priorities for the profession. Those experts charged with the priority area of curriculum and materials identified three necessary components of a foreign language program: a linguistic component, a cultural component, and a communicative component. Most textbooks up to the present have treated only the linguistic component systematically. What is needed is a systematic treatment also of culture and communication, with equal weighting given to all three components.

A textbook must make clear the relationship between language and culture to be selected. A textbook which keeps cultural information isolated should be rejected. A textbook which does not emphasize the use of language for communication should not be adopted. In summary, for a foreign language textbook to get high marks, authentic language must be integrated into authentic cultural contexts with the focus on communication.

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